

*Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2021*

**Remarks at a Memorial Day Ceremony in Arlington, Virginia**  
*May 31, 2021*

Madam Vice President, Secretary Austin, Secretary McDonough, General Milley, Gold Star families, my fellow Americans: We're gathered at this sacred place in this solemn hour to engage in the most fundamental of undertakings: the rite of remembrance.

Remember those who gave their all in the service of America, in the service of freedom, in the service of justice. Remember their sacrifice, their valor, and their grace. Remember their smiles; their loves; their laughter; their essential, vibrant, and transcendent humanity.

For while we stand amid monuments of stone, we must never forget that each of these markers, for those known and unknown, here at Arlington and far beyond represent a precious life: a son, a daughter, a mother, a spouse, a brother, a sister, a friend, a neighbor.

To those who mourn a loved one today: Jill and I have some idea how you're feeling. Our losses are not the same, but that black hole you feel in your chest, as if it's going to suck you into it, we get. I know the incredible pride you felt seeing your loved one wear the uniform of our country and the pride they felt wearing it.

Our son Beau's service in the Delaware Army National Guard unit, the year he spent deployed in Iraq, was one of the things that he was most proud of in life. Yesterday marked the anniversary of his death. And it's a hard time, a hard time of year for me and our family, just like it is for so many of you. It can hurt to remember, but the hurt is how we feel and how we heal.

I always feel Beau close to me on Memorial Day. I know exactly where I need to be: right here, honoring our fallen heroes. Because through pain and anguish of his loss, I remember the pride on his face the day I pinned those bars on his shoulders.

To all of you who are fighting with the fresh pain of loss, as hard as it is to believe, I promise you this: The day will come when the image of your loved one will bring a smile to your lips before it brings a tear to your eyes.

The Bible teaches, "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted." That comfort, that reassurance can be a long time in coming, but it will come—I promise you. And my prayer for all of you is that that day will come sooner rather than later.

We all know Memorial Day origins lie in the wake of the Civil War, a war for the freedom of all, a war for union, a war for liberty and for the preservation of the Constitution. In calling for such today, General John Logan, commander of the Grand Army of the Republic, issued General Order Number 11. He directed the Nation set aside a day to honor—and I quote—"those who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion and whose bodies now lie in almost every city, village, and hamlet churchyard throughout the land."

And so we have, and so we do again today, in our time, where the children of sacrifice made by a long line of American servicemembers, each a link in that chain of honor. We live by the light of the flame of liberty they kept burning. We're free because they were brave.

Here on these gentle, rolling green hills and across America and around the globe lie buried the heroes of the greatest experiment the world has ever known, ever seen. The experiment bears the noble name: the United States of America.

Women and men, all those we honor today, gave their lives for their country, but they live forever in our hearts: forever proud, forever honorable, forever American. They are the sentinels

of liberty, defenders of the downtrodden, liberators of nations. And still today, Americans stand watch around the world, often at their great personal peril. War and conflict, death and loss are not relics of our American history; they're a part of Americans' story. Here in Arlington lie heroes who gave what President Lincoln called "the last full measure of devotion."

They did not only die at Gettysburg or in Flanders Field or on the beaches of Normandy, but in the mountains of Afghanistan, the deserts of Iraq in the last 20 years. Section 60, when I walk through it, reminds me of the cost of war. Hundreds of graves—hundreds of graves—are here from recent conflicts. Hundreds of patriots gave their all, each—each of them—leaving behind a family who live with their pain and their absence every single day.

I want to assure each of those families: We will never forget what you gave to our country. We will never fail to honor your sacrifice. Each day—starting when I was Vice President of the United States—I carry in my pocket a number of troops killed during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Not an approximation, not rounded-off numbers, they each leave behind an entire community and family. And today, that number is 7,036—7,036 fallen angels who have lost their lives in these conflicts.

And on this Memorial Day, we honor their legacy and their sacrifice. Duty, honor, country—they lived for it; they died for it. And we, as a nation, are eternally grateful.

You know, America has been forged in the battle and the fires of war. Our freedom and the freedom of innumerable others has been secured by young men and women who answered the call of history and gave everything in the service of an idea: the idea of America.

It's the greatest idea in the long history of humankind. An idea that we're all created equal in the image of Almighty God. That we're all entitled to dignity, as my father would say, and respect, decency, and honor. Love of neighbor. They're not empty words, but the vital, beating heart of our Nation.

And that democracy must be defended at all costs, for democracy makes all this possible. Democracy—that's the soul of America, and I believe it's a soul worth fighting for, and so do you; a soul worth dying for. Heroes who lie in eternal peace in this beautiful place, this sacred place, they believed that too.

The soul of America is animated by the perennial battle between our worst instincts—which we've seen of late—and our better angels. Between "Me first" and "We the People." Between greed and generosity, cruelty and kindness, captivity and freedom.

The Americans of Lexington and Concord, of New Orleans, Gettysburg, the Argonne, Iwo Jima and Normandy, Korea and Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq, and thousands of places in between—these Americans weren't fighting for dictators, they were fighting for democracy.

They weren't fighting to exclude or to enslave, they were fighting to build and broaden and liberate. They weren't fighting for self, they were fighting for the soul of the Nation, for liberty and simple fair play—simple fair play and decency.

Today, as we remember their sacrifice, we remind ourselves of our duty to their memory, to the future they fought for. We owe the honored dead a debt we can never fully repay. We owe them our whole souls. We owe them our full best efforts to perfect the Union for which they died.

We owe them the work of our hands and our hearts, to make real the promise of a nation founded on the proposition that all of us—all of us—all of us are created equal and deserve to be treated that way throughout our lives.

Democracy is more than a form of government. It's a way of being; it's a way of seeing the world. Democracy means the rule of the people—the rule of the people. Not the rule of monarchs, not the rule of the moneyed, not the rule of the mighty, literally, the rule of the people.

The lives of billions, from antiquity to our own hour, have been shaped by the battle between aspirations of the many and the greed of the few; between people's right to self-determination and the self-seeking of a dictator; between dreams of democracy and appetites for autocracy, which we're seeing around the world. Our troops have fought this battle on fields around the world, but also the battle of our time. And the mission falls to each of us, each and every day. Democracy itself is in peril, here at home and around the world.

What we do now—what we do now—how we honor the memory of the fallen, will determine whether or not democracy will long endure. We all take it for granted. We think we learned in school. You have to—every generation has to fight for it.

But look, it's the biggest question: Whether a system that prizes the individual, that bends towards liberty, that gives everybody a chance at prosperity—whether that system can and will prevail against powerful forces that wish it harm.

All that we do in our common life as a nation is part of that struggle: the struggle for democracy is taking place around the world—democracy and autocracy; the struggle for decency and dignity—just simple decency; the struggle for posterity—prosperity and progress; and yes, the struggle for the soul of America itself.

Folks, you all know it: Democracy thrives when the infrastructure of democracy is strong; when people have the right to vote freely and fairly and conveniently; when a free and independent press pursues the truth, founded on facts, not propaganda; when the rule of law applies equally and fairly to every citizen, regardless of where they come from or what they look like.

*[At this point, the President coughed.]*

Excuse me. Wherever Americans are, there—there—is democracy: churches and synagogues and mosques, neighborhoods and coffee shops and diners, bleachers at kids' baseball or soccer games, libraries and parks. Democracy begins and grows in the open heart and the impetus to come together for a common cause.

And I might note, parenthetically: Thank you, TAPS. That's what you do.

And that's where it will be preserved. For empathy is the fuel of democracy. Let me say that again: Empathy—empathy—is the fuel of democracy, a willingness to see each other not as enemies, neighbors. Even when we disagree, to understand what the other is going through.

To state the obvious: Our democracy is imperfect. It always has been. But Americans of all backgrounds, races, creeds, gender identities, sexual orientations, have long spilled their blood to defend our democracy. The diversity of our country and our Armed—and of our Armed Services is and always has been an incredible strength.

And generation after generation of American heroes have signed up to be part of the fight because they understand the truth that lives in every American heart: that liberation, opportunity, justice are far more likely to come to pass in a democracy than an autocracy.

If every person is sacred, then every person's rights are sacred. Individual dignity; individual worth; individual sanctity; the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We say those words so often, but think of it: the right to vote, the right to rise in a world as far as your talent can take you, unlimited by unfair barriers of privilege and power—such are the principles of democracy.

So how would you put these noble principles into practice? How do we do that? How do we make the idea real or as close to real as we can make it? This Nation was built on an idea, the only Nation in the world built on an idea. Every other nation was built on ethnicity, geography, religion, et cetera.

We were built on an idea: the idea of liberty and opportunity for all. We have never fully realized that aspiration of our founding, but every generation has opened the door a little wider, and every generation has opened it wider and wider to be more inclusive, to include those who have been excluded before. It's a mission handed down generation to generation: the work of perfecting our Union.

In 1830, when we were a young nation, disunionists put their sectional interests ahead of the common good. A great Senator, Daniel Webster, rose in the Capitol to defend the Union. To him, we were not just a collection of competing forces, but a coherent whole. His cry, first uttered just across the Potomac in the Capitol, resonates even now. He stood on the floor, and he said, "Liberty and Union, now on forever, one and inseparable." Liberty and Union.

More than 142 years later, when I first came to the United States Senate—at a time when our country was so deeply divided over Vietnam, the struggle of civil rights, the fight over women's rights—I had the notion that my first task, as I stood to make my first speech on the floor of the Senate—it all of a sudden hit me: I'm standing where Daniel Webster had stood; his desk was next to mine.

And I was struck by the weight of history, as corny as it sounds, by the legacy of the work we're charged to carry forward: liberty and union, now and forever.

Now as then, unity is essential to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And so we remember those who gave their all in the cause of unity, in the cause of a nation that endures because of them.

We must honor their sacrifice by sustaining the best of America, while honestly confronting all that we must do to make our Nation fuller, freer, and more just. We must remember that we may find the light and the wisdom and, yes, the courage to move forward, in the words of that great hymn, fight as they "nobly fought of old." For in remembrance lies not just our history, but our hope; not just our solemn remembrance, but our renewed purpose; not just our solace, but our strength.

This Memorial Day, remember that not all of us are called to make the ultimate sacrifice. We all are called, by God and by history and by conscience, to make our Nation free and fair, just and strong, noble and whole.

To this battle, may we now dedicate our souls, that our work may prove worthy of the blood of our fallen. For this work—the work of democracy—is the work of our time and for all time. And if we do our duty, then ages still to come will look back on us and say that we, too, kept the faith. And there's nothing more important, nothing more sacred, nothing more American than keeping the faith.

May God bless the United States of America, and may the light perpetually shine upon the fallen. May God bring comfort to their families, and may God protect our troops, today and always. God bless you all.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:34 a.m. in the Memorial Amphitheater at Arlington National Cemetery. In his remarks, he referred to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark A. Milley, USA.

*Categories:* Addresses and Remarks : Memorial Day ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, VA.

*Locations:* Arlington, VA.

*Names:* Austin, Lloyd J., III; Biden, Jill T.; Harris, Kamala D.; McDonough, Denis R.; Milley, Mark A.

*Subjects:* Afghanistan : U.S. military forces :: Casualties; Armed Forces, U.S : Military families; Armed Forces, U.S : Servicemembers :: Casualties; Armed Forces, U.S. : Military families; Armed Forces, U.S. : National Guard; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Casualties; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Deployment; Armed Forces, U.S. : Servicemembers :: Service and dedication; Civil rights : Civil rights movement; Civil rights : Voting rights; Civil rights : Women's rights and gender equality; Defense, Department of : Joint Chiefs of Staff; Defense, Department of : Secretary; Holidays and special observances : Memorial Day; Iraq : U.S. military forces, casualties; Tragedy Assistance Program For Survivors (TAPS); Veterans Affairs, Department of : Secretary; Virginia : Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington; Virginia : President's visits; White House Office : Vice President.

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